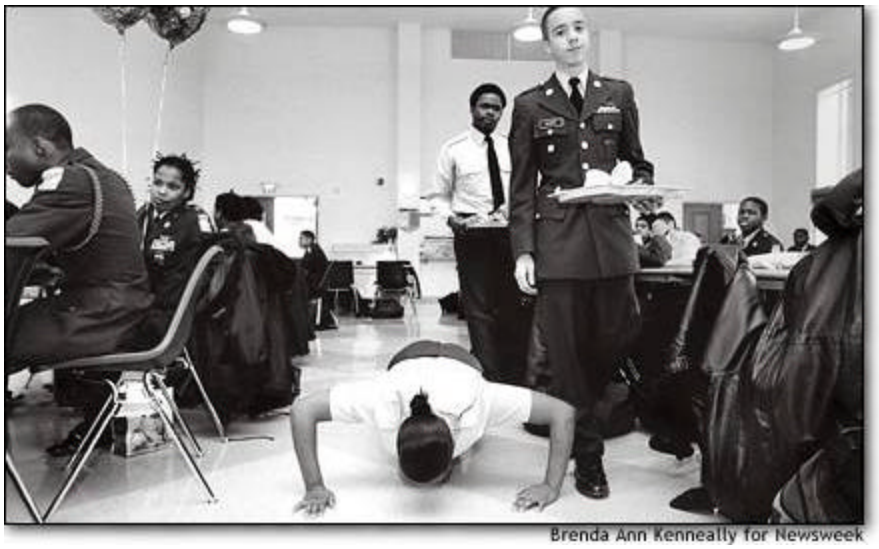


A female student does push-ups at the Chicago Military Academy; the public high school is part of a growing experiment by public-school districts to adopt the philosophy and structure of the Armed Forces

# High School at Attention

**In Chicago and across the country, educators are taking a controversial new step. Their aim: to bring order to dangerous, unruly public schools and coherence to chaotic lives. The experiment: military rule**

By Dirk Johnson

NEWSWEEK

Jan. 21 issue — Wearing army greens and spit-shined black shoes, the cadets stand ramrod straight and silent. It is 7:30 a.m., time for dress inspection. “Drop!” barks a platoon leader, spotting a uniform infraction, a cadet without a name tag on his jacket. Busted, the cadet hits the deck, pumps 10 push-ups, then asks for mercy: “Permission to recover, sir?” The request is granted, and the offender jumps to his feet, still huffing, and calls out his gratitude in military rote: “Thank you, sir,” he says, “for conditioning my mind and body.” The day is just beginning in this

# Chicago public high school, where the traditional three R's are joined by a fourth: regimentation.

THE THREE-YEAR-OLD Chicago Military Academy, in the street-tough Bronzeville neighborhood on the city's South Side, is part of a growing experiment by public-school districts, mostly in America's urban centers, to adopt the ethos and structure of the armed forces. Like compulsory uniforms and zero-tolerance policies, the move marks the latest step aimed at bringing order to schools that can be unruly and even dangerous. Educators like Jeffrey Mirel of the University of Michigan say urban school leaders have become willing to take radical steps because "the problems in urban schools are so severe, and have gone on so long," despite two decades of reforms. For many children growing up without a cohesive family, the military model seems to offer a bedrock of stability—a world of clear-cut rules and unmistakable authority figures.

The military style has captured the imagination of school leaders around the nation. Oakland, Calif., opened a public military high school at the start of the school year. Next fall, Prince George's County in Maryland, outside Washington, D.C., will convert a neighborhood high school to a military-style academy. A public middle school in Charleston, S.C., is run in a military fashion, as is a public high school in Richmond, Va. Private military academies have existed for centuries, usually as boarding schools that can charge $20,000 a year. But it is only in the last few years that many public schools have seriously considered the approach. School officials in Atlanta, among others, have traveled to Chicago to scout the Bronzeville academy, housed in a refurbished old brick armory, a stone's throw from street corners governed by gang members.

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**A CULTURAL ABOUT-FACE**

The popularity of military schools marks a cultural about-face from a generation ago, says Charles Moskos, a military sociologist at Northwestern University, recalling the antiwar tenor of the late '60s and '70s, "when colleges like Harvard were kicking the ROTC off campus." The critics of military schools have not vanished. Rick Johnkow, the coordinator for the Project on Youth and Nonmilitary Opportunities, based in San Diego, charges that military-style schools steer poor, black students into the armed forces, rather than encouraging them to go to college.

But sociologists like Moskos say the military has achieved credibility among young minorities and their parents, in large part because it is a rare institution that is not dominated at top levels by whites. "The Army is the only place in American society where whites are routinely bossed around by blacks," he says.

It's too early to tell whether military-style schools will succeed in raising test scores and restoring order. But attendance at the Chicago academy is running at 95 percent, a figure that most urban school administrators can only dream about. The Chicago academy, which has roughly the same number of boys and girls, is open to any student in the city. All that is required is a grammar-school diploma and a letter of recommendation.

For this school year, there were 2,000 applications for 140 slots in the freshman class; a committee chose not the brightest or the most troubled, but what it considered the most well-rounded group. The boss at the academy is retired Brig. Gen. Frank C. Bacon, a 72-year-old veteran of the Korean War, gray-haired but still square-shouldered. By turns stern and avuncular, Bacon sometimes sounds a bit like Father Flanagan from Boys Town. "They can have been in trouble and still come here," he says. "They just can't stay in trouble and stay here." Bacon says the school does not necessarily take the top students. "Hell, I can go out and get a lot of ultrabright kids who will make me look good," he says. "But what good does that do? I'm interested in taking average kids and making above-average citizens out of them."

**MERCILESS BULLYING**

Robert Shores, 16, says he was a lost child with a bad temper when he enrolled at the Chicago academy three years ago. He hadn't seen his father in years. His mother for a time succumbed to drugs, moving away and leaving Robert and his two siblings in the care of an aunt. The other boys at his grammar school bullied the slender boy mercilessly. They called him "shorty" and "little man." Gang members came calling, trying to recruit him. "They said they'd fight for me," Robert says.

He didn't join. But he learned to use his fists. He got in trouble for fighting. He got in trouble for throwing rocks through windows. He got in trouble for smart-talking to teachers. His report card in the eighth grade showed D's.

His mother, Phyllis, who had kicked drugs and moved home, read a newspaper article about the planned military academy in Bronzeville. She thought he should give it a try. "No way," he told her. But they eventually struck a deal: he would attend for one year. If he didn't like it, he could quit. During his first year at the academy, he got into plenty of scrapes, mostly for clowning. For misbehaving in English class, he was sent to the Peer Council, a student-run body that hears disciplinary cases and metes out punishment. The council can give detentions, order a student to scrub floors or maybe run in the gym for an entire day. In this case, the council told Robert to go back to English class and apologize to the teacher, Ms. Vines. So one morning he looked her in the eye and told her, "I'm sorry I disrupted your class." He meant it, and she accepted the apology. To Robert, the simple act of fessing up, standing accountable for his wrongs, struck a chord. He said it made him feel like a man. He started acting like one.

**RIGHT AND WRONG**

He hasn't been a perfect angel. But his grades improved. He joined the sports teams—basketball, baseball, soccer. He plays drums and cornet in the academy's band. "If you feel like nobody cares about you, then you feel like a nobody," Robert says. "But there's a lot of people here who really like me. They'll pull me aside and tell me what I did wrong. And they tell me what I've done right."

Phyllis Shores says the academy has been the salvation of her son. "Robert's a totally different child since he's been at that school," she says. He helps around the house, fixing cabinets and light switches. He even makes it his responsibility to clean the bathroom in their upstairs apartment in a brick two-flat on the city's South Side.

At military-style schools, the armed forces typically pay half the salaries of officers who work as instructors, and pick up the cost of the kids' uniforms and equipment. Of the

50 administrators and teachers at the Chicago academy, 10 are retired military officers. But even the civilian teachers invoke the military code. Dina Morelli, a diminutive art teacher, begins her class with a sharp command: "At-tention to muster! Roll call." ROTC officials say their participation is not part of a recruiting drive, but rather part of an effort to promote good citizenship. Critics dispute the claim, noting that one study shows roughly 40 percent of these students plan to eventually join the military. Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley led the push for a military academy. He said the military-style schools simply offer another option, like magnet schools that emphasize art or foreign language. Daley faced some arched eyebrows from skeptics when he proposed the military academy. But he shrugged off the criticism as coming from "those '60s-type people" who still harbor distrust of the military. When Mayor Jerry Brown of Oakland pushed for a military academy in that overwhelmingly liberal city two years ago, he was greeted by more than raised eyebrows. "They called me a racist and a militarist," Brown says. "You had people who hate the military, who thought we were going to turn these little kids into killers." His plan was shot down by the Oakland school board, so Brown went to the state for approval. California gave $1.3 million toward the Oakland Military Institute, which is affiliated with the state's National Guard.

**'IT DOESN'T BELONG HERE'**

But the critics in Oakland are still riled. Dan Siegel, who is a member of the school board that opposed the academy, called the military school "culturally inconsistent with the traditions" of the East Bay. "It's like putting the Ronald Reagan Museum in Berkeley. It doesn't belong here."

But Brown, who was educated by the Jesuits, says the military approach shares some of the virtues of Roman Catholic schools, which have shown success in educating poor children in urban centers. "I see authority. I see discipline." Brown loves to tell Oakland Military cadets: "I've met a lot of Catholic nuns who are tougher than any drill sergeant."

To Brown and others worried about urban education, the crisis of poor test scores demands some kind of new campaign. For now, it seems that plenty of school boards and parents—and young people, too—stand poised to salute.

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*With Pat Wingert in Washington, D.C., and Karen Breslau in San Francisco*